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# How Do Non-Governmental Organisations Influence Media Coverage of Conflict? The Case of the Syrian conflict, 2011-2014<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

It is often argued that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become increasingly visible in media discourses on armed conflict and thus play a growing role in shaping states' foreign policies. However, there is little investigation of their influence on specific conflict coverage and what types of NGOs are influential, in what way and under what conditions. The authors elaborate a 'supply and demand' model of growing or declining NGO influence to theorize these dynamics and take Syria's civil war from 2011–2014 as a 'best case' for testing it. They conducted an interpretative analysis of NGO output and media coverage to investigate the relative visibility of NGOs in the media over time. Further, they examine how different NGOs were referred to during two highly salient phases of the conflict for debates about foreign policy: the first escalation of protests and their repression in 2011 and the use of chemical weapons in 2013. They find evidence of rising NGO visibility and growing reliance on new types of semi-local NGOs for the provision of factual news about the conflict and human rights violations. Yet, large international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch remained the most influential in pushing normative frames and advocating a tough stance on the Assad regime. The article discusses the implications of the findings for the theoretical argument and for broader accounts of NGOs influence.

## Keywords

French news media, influence, Syrian civil war, UK news media, war reporting, Western foreign policy

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## 1. Introduction

How are Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) able to influence and shape public discourses on armed conflict in today's profoundly changed media environment? This article provides new theoretical and empirical insights based on the context of the war in Syria. Six years of violent conflict have cost the lives of at least 175,545 Syrian citizens at the time of writing in March 2017, of whom 70 percent were categorised as civilian (Violations Documentation Center, 2017). The intensity of the conflict now rivals the 2003 Iraq war including its long aftermath of sectarian strife and easily surpasses the wars in former Yugoslavia. Compared to these earlier examples, however, the Syrian civil war has evolved in a different media landscape and under conditions that are profoundly more challenging to foreign affairs journalism.

In this article, we seek to investigate whether and to what extent NGOs have benefited from these conditions and become more prominent in shaping media coverage of the conflict. Are they just cited for information about events? Do they advance analytical judgements or normative framings? Or are they quoted in support of or opposition to particular foreign policy options? These questions are not just relevant for better understanding the role of NGOs in journalistic news production but also for debates on the role of NGOs in conflict management and foreign policy-making (Bakker, 2001; Meyer and Sangar, 2014; Ron, Ramos, & Rodgers, 2005; Thrall, Stecula, & Sweet, 2014).

We develop a "supply and demand" model that integrates both structural as well as case-specific factors to understand under what conditions NGOs can be expected to play an increasingly important role in Western news media coverage of foreign conflicts. This model can complement existing accounts of NGO influence and foreign news, which are insufficiently sensitive to the interplay between characteristics of journalistic news production, NGO communication capacities and case-specific challenges. In a second step, we provide evidence for rising NGO influence on British and French media discourses on the Syrian conflict and the consideration of foreign policy options by these countries. We investigate these empirical questions in two ways through media content analysis: first, by examining the relative visibility of NGOs in overall media coverage of the Syrian conflict over time and in relation to conflict intensity. We then explore the nature of the influence through an interpretative analysis of sampled articles from selected French and British news media, based on the most often quoted NGOs during two crucial episodes of the conflict: the increasing use of repressive measures against the protests in 2011 and the use of chemical weapons in 2013.

## 2. A Supply and Demand model for Studying NGO Influence on Media Coverage

How do NGOs shape media discourses on armed conflict? Media discourses are the sum of discourses that are produced on a specific topic and disseminated via media organisations using multiple channels such as newspapers, radio, television and social networking services. We focus on traditional media as they retain substantial audience share among the general public and especially among foreign policy communities in European democracies. Much of the writing about the role of NGOs in foreign affairs has focused on their significant and growing influence on the longer-term formation, diffusion and internalisation of new collective

norms through both public and non-public advocacy. This is traced to growth in the number, resourcefulness and stature of NGOs since the end of the Cold War. For example, between 1992 and 2010 the number of NGOs registered with UN ECOSOC grew from 724 to 3,382 (STATISTA, 2017). According to Keck & Sikkink (1998) or Price (1998), NGOs form transnational action networks that can raise awareness and support for universalist causes even against the resistance of national governments. NGOs have also been recognised as essential gatekeepers for insurgency movements striving to gain international recognition for their cause and thus access to legitimacy and external support (Bob, 2005). Quantitative studies have found evidence that, for example, Amnesty International's reports on human rights have resulted in increased coverage of those issues in European news media, thus 'suggesting that global advocacy NGOs can shape the agenda' (Ramos, Ron, & Thoms, 2007, p. 401).

But do these findings also apply to media discourses on foreign conflicts, characterised by higher levels of salience, epistemic uncertainty and greater contestation about how to act? The literature on the role of NGOs in this specific context is more limited and does not attempt to measure influence on media content (de Waal, 2015; Goodhand, 2006). However, we can identify several factors that suggest increasing NGO influence on media coverage of war over the past 10-15 years. By compiling and integrating these arguments with our own research conducted in the framework of the INFOCORE research project, we argue that the evolving media presence of NGOs can best be analysed through a "supply and demand" model of news selection by journalists. This model conceptualizes recent dynamics in NGO-media relations as a simultaneous increase in media demand for NGO information and analysis as well as increased NGO capacity to supply media contents compared to alternative sources. The dependent variable is NGO influence on media discourses across two basic dimensions: organisational visibility in terms of increasing amounts of references to NGO sources in media production, and content influence in terms of being the direct or indirect source for evidential, interpretative and action claims cited in media discourses about a given conflict.

Which arguments does the "supply and demand" model incorporate? On the demand side, the most important factor is the increasing fragility of the business model of quality news media as revenues decreased due to a loss in advertising, declining subscription rates and increasing competition from non-traditional news providers. Foreign affairs coverage has been hit particularly hard by these trends as its immediate relevance to local audiences is more difficult to explain, whilst its costs per output are higher due to the costs for travelling, equipment, insurance, local access and security. As a result, many media organisations decided to close their offices abroad, shift from high-status permanent foreign correspondents towards junior freelancers or local contractors, or indeed buy-in more content from news agencies (Meyer & Otto, 2011). Such trends may increase a tendency even of large transnational news networks to rely on "parachute journalism" and other cost-saving measures to provide coverage of those violent conflicts and wars that are too important to ignore (Musa & Yusha'u, 2013). In such a context, NGOs often play the role of logistic enablers as well as providers of background stories for sometimes inexperienced reporters on short-term assignments. This means that 'NGOs can now offer international news that news organizations are no longer well placed to provide' (Fenton, 2010, p. 160). It is therefore not surprising that quantitative studies have overall confirmed that 'the news outlets that dedicated the fewest resources to international newsgathering are most likely to mention NGOs' (Powers, 2016, p. 327).

In addition, the changing nature of contemporary conflicts means that journalists are at greater risk of being tortured, killed or abducted for either financial or propagandistic purposes. Whereas in the past, experienced

correspondents could rely on their networks to navigate risk or seek authorisation from military leaders to access regions with some protection, they are faced more frequently with a more hostile and complex environment. Moreover, security risks may have increased because

of relatively cheap broadcasting technology [that] has, to some degree, eliminated the need for a third party intercessor like a journalist. Indeed, for some, the publicity gained by the act of kidnapping a journalist is more valuable than whatever avenues of communication that journalist offers (Crawford & Davies, 2014, p. 8).

These increased risks deter not only individual journalists concerned for their personal safety, but also translate into prohibitively high insurance premiums for journalists and their equipment at a time when large Western media organisations give less space for individual employees to decide for themselves where to travel and what risks they are willing to take given the scope of legal, financial and reputational risk management techniques. Needless to say, this factor is highly variable across different conflict situations in terms of access, pre-existing knowledge and expertise. But on the whole, it makes journalists more dependent on alternative sources for information about conflicts that are deemed highly newsworthy. Especially humanitarian NGOs, but also advocacy NGOs relying on their own staff of local researchers, are often the last remaining actors in conflict zones that can provide timely first hand or reliably researched accounts of local conflict events and dynamics, while being considered more trustworthy sources than conflict parties.

Since the end of the Cold War, some have argued that as a result of the emergence of non-state actors in international politics, governments have been increasingly challenged in the production of authoritative claims (Hall & Biersteker, 2002). Journalists may have become more sceptical vis-à-vis governments and officials as sources of information, partly as a result of the specific experience of perceived manipulation of factual evidence in recent interventions such as Iraq or Libya. Non-governmental actors may therefore have received a relative credibility bonus in the eyes of journalists. Journalists perceive NGOs as a supplementary source of evidence and analysis of armed conflict, which can complement or even challenge information provided by official sources. A recent study has even found that 'by privileging one source over others, [...] journalists regularly articulate a "humanitarian authority structure" consisting of a variety of actors including governments, INGOs, and IGOs' (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2010, p. 118).

Turning towards the supply side of our model, we observe an increased overall capability of NGOs to produce and disseminate relevant conflict information for the media. The number and resources of international NGOs (INGOs) have grown substantially since the end of the Cold War. The largest NGOs have annual budgets of hundreds of millions of US dollars and employ large numbers of staff, many of them working in the field and with specialised training. These provide NGOs not just with deep and up-to-date geographical expertise that many media organisations no longer possess, but also with the logistics, networks and know-how to operate relatively safely in conflict zones (the authors, 2015). At times, they even accommodate the media's increasing financial pressures by organising and sponsoring press trips to conflict zones that are part of NGOs' operating areas. Furthermore, NGOs have been able to hire communication professionals at all levels, including former journalists, to professionalise their external communication activities and increase their reputation through regular contacts with foreign affairs journalists (Fenton, 2010, pp. 154-161). They judge that providing accurate and timely conflict information to the media is not just a door-opener to the diffusion of their normative agendas for action, but also signals recognition and influence to their supporters and donors. Some NGOs, like Human Rights Watch (HRW), even perceive themselves as performing at least partly the function

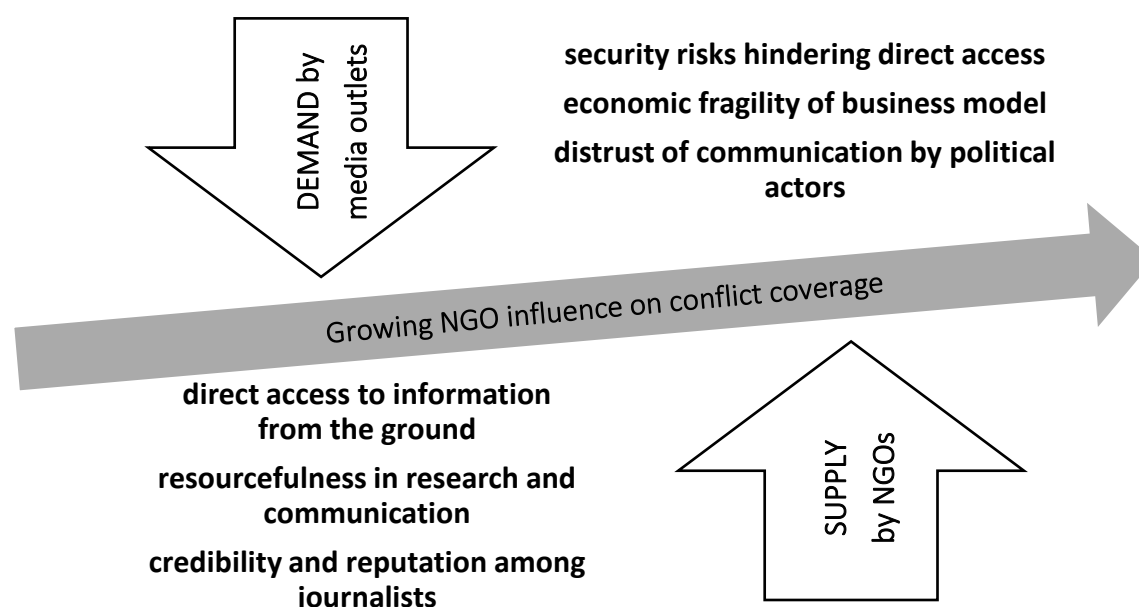
of a news agency (Meyer and Sangar, 2015). Especially humanitarian INGOs 'increasingly internalize today's media logic. The incorporation of media predilections has become institutionalized and normalized within the humanitarian aid agency field' (Cottle & Nolan, 2007, p. 874). As NGOs have over time acquired a public profile and credibility, some have become not just sources of information, but also quasi-political actors on the domestic and international scene. When INGOs such as Amnesty International (AI), OXFAM or HRW criticise Western foreign policy, this resonates with the public and journalists reflect this increased political clout in their coverage.

Our model predicts that, all other things being equal, NGO influence on media discourses on foreign armed conflict will increase when:

- H1a. Journalists are unable to directly report from the country due to unacceptably high security risks.
- H1b. Media organisations do not have the resources to employ experienced correspondents and provide sufficient support for their field trips.
- H1c. When trust in political actors for the provision of reliable information about the conflict is low.
- H2a. When NGOs have staff on the ground who are able to conduct empirical research.
- H2b. When NGOs have invested substantial resources into the professionalization of their media and communication activities.
- H2c. When NGOs have acquired substantial credibility as a provider of reliable conflict information for journalists.

Figure 1 summarises our conceptual model of the changing influence of NGOs on media coverage of conflict:

Figure 1: The supply and demand model



What this model does not capture is the broader, less-tangible and longer-term impact of NGOs on social and political contexts, including why certain frames become more dominant in public debates about foreign policy than others, and how political agendas interact with media discourses over time. Moreover, our model does not seek to explain the overall characteristics of media coverage as other more ambitious accounts do: Herman & Chomsky's work (2002) on media coverage being strongly influenced and limited by overall elite consensus and the ideology of capitalism, Bennett's account of journalists' 'indexing' of government debate and consensus (1990), Wolfsfeld's P-M-P model where politics comes first and last (2011), or Entman's 'Cascading Activation Model' where dissent among foreign policy elites is a necessary albeit not sufficient condition for competing frames to emerge in the media and ultimately public opinion (Entman, 2003, p. 420).

Based on the existing research, one cannot necessarily expect growing relative influence of NGOs on media coverage to translate directly into change in the dominant media frames on conflict, which may remain strongly influenced by prevailing views and interests of political elites. Gamson and Wolfsfeld assert that the relationship between media and civil society movements is asymmetrical, with the latter being dependent on the former to reach and mobilise the general public (1993, p. 116). A study of coverage of international aid crises by the Belgian press showed that even though the visibility of NGOs was growing, 'international news coverage, including international aid coverage, is dominated by authoritative sources and especially government sources' (Van Leuven & Joye, 2014, p. 162). Even in the congenial area of human rights, government officials are on average almost as often prominently quoted as high-profile INGOs (Powers, 2016, pp. 324-325).

However, our model does depart in its underlying assumptions from some of this literature. We expect that most private media organisations operating within comparatively free media system have a genuine incentive to provide timely, accurate and relevant news content about developing foreign conflicts as a means of protecting market shares and relevance with informed publics. We also assume that many, but by no means all, INGOs have substantial autonomy from governments to pursue their own mission and express criticism of

government policy given their funding structure, public support and networks. Finally, we observe that our model works best in a specific historical context where trust in government authorities has declined, Western foreign policy and particularly military interventions are widely perceived to have failed, and many government strategies admit to heightened levels of uncertainty and surprise (Kafura et al., 2016). While our model is not *per se* incompatible with the literature that tends to give primacy to governmental sources in shaping media coverage, it does emphasise that journalists cultivate relationships with multiple sources and draw more on alternative non-state sources when they are *in relative terms* more credible and better providers of timely, relevant and specific content, especially in periods lacking a clear-cut domestic agenda regarding a foreign conflict.

### 3. Evaluating NGO influence on the media coverage of the Syria conflict

We will now assess the empirical plausibility of the “supply and demand model” to examine NGO influence on media coverage of the Syria conflict. Our study combines techniques of quantitative, automated content analysis with qualitative interpretative analysis of media content. We consider Syria a “best case” to test our theoretical assumptions about the increased influence of NGOs on media coverage of armed conflict. Prior to 2011, Syria was less afflicted by instability than many of its neighbours such as Turkey, Iraq, Israel or Lebanon which partly explains why Western media had only limited resources on the ground when protests erupted. Since then, it has become one of the most violent and complex conflicts, attracting huge European media interest given its match with news values such as negativity, unexpectedness, social deviance, and significance of the conflict to European audiences (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker, Danelian, & Brendlinger, 1991). To illustrate this, with over 360,000 sampled articles between 2010 and 2014, the INFOCORE corpus on the conflict in Syria is more than three times larger than the corpus on the multiple conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the same period. The rapidly evolving nature of the conflict and the proliferation of conflict parties created substantial and increasing epistemic uncertainty about conflict dynamics, key events and future trajectory. At the same time, the atrocities committed against civilians, the use of chemical weapons, the exodus of millions of refugees, the emergence of jihadist movements, and the rivalry between regional and great powers created significant contestation about norms, interests and foreign policy options. Syria became increasingly inaccessible to Western journalists due to legal restrictions to enter the country as well as the fragmentation and radicalisation of conflict parties – a development which culminated in killings of Western journalists by government forces and the so-called “Islamic State” (IS). Given these conditions, we would expect to find significant and rising influence of NGOs not just on the reporting of conflict events, but also on the media’s interpretation of the conflict and the question of what, if anything, should be done about it.

To capture the potential impact of NGOs on media discourses on armed conflict, we firstly explore the extent to which NGOs have featured in global media coverage as a proxy for their growing importance in the eyes of journalists. We operationalise this as the relative frequency of media publications using NGO references compared to the overall coverage of the conflict in Syria as detailed in section 3.1. This visibility or importance measure does not *per se* mean a positive recognition of NGOs as credible news sources as they might also be covered for what they do on the ground which may entail substantial criticism. However, being visible is a form of validation of importance and thus a precondition for other forms of influence. To gain a better sense



of how NGOs are quoted in the media, we will complement this quantitative approach with an interpretative qualitative analysis to assess in what way NGOs were cited. In particular, we were interested in ascertaining the extent to which NGOs were referred to as sources of observable facts, broader analytical or interpretative claims, or for advocacy on what to do.

### 3.1. Increased NGO visibility in media discourses on the Syrian conflict

In the following, we present results of a quantitative, automated content analysis of NGO references in international media discourses on the Syria conflict. Using INFOCORE's content-analytical tool JamCAT, developed by Christian Baden and Katsiaryna Stolpovskaya<sup>2</sup>, absolute and relative frequencies of NGO references can be retrieved based on their occurrences in individual articles, a corpus assembled by a team led by Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt. A total of 35 press and audio-visual outlets were identified, which include Syrian and international press agencies, national newspapers, as well as international opinion leading media, such as Radio France Internationale, Al-Jazeera, or CNN<sup>3</sup>. This general overview allows us to trace broader trends in NGO visibility in global media coverage beyond France and the UK and over a longer period of time. For each of the selected media sources, texts (articles or broadcast transcripts) were sampled using a combination of keywords relevant for the coverage of the Syrian conflict. The created corpus (size: n=365,611) covers the years 2010 through 2014, thus enabling longitudinal analysis.<sup>4</sup>

To identify NGO references, we used a dictionary of 59 NGO names, including 11 "local" NGOs.<sup>5</sup> We aggregated the references to all these NGOs. Overall, we found 14,268 articles that contain at least one NGO reference, which corresponds to a relative frequency (compared to the total number of sampled articles) of 3.9 percent. Figure 2 shows the monthly evolution of relative frequencies:

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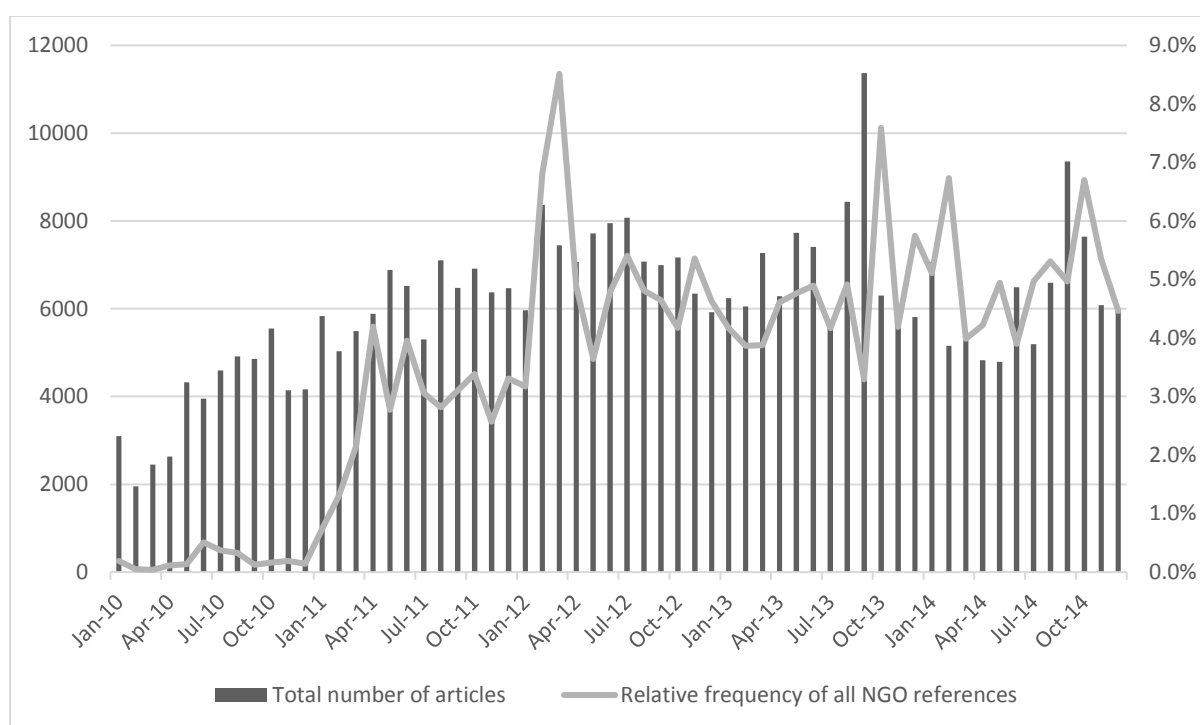
<sup>2</sup> More background information can be found in Baden and Stalpouskaya (2015, p. 14). See also <http://jamcat.mscc.huji.ac.il/navigator/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for full list.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the sampling approach used in INFOCORE, see Baden and Stalpouskaya (2015, pp. 5-10).

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for full list. The term "local" needs to be treated with caution, given that some of these NGOs have their small headquarters outside Syria, such as the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Figure 2: total number of sampled articles and relative frequencies of NGO references, January 2010 to December 2014

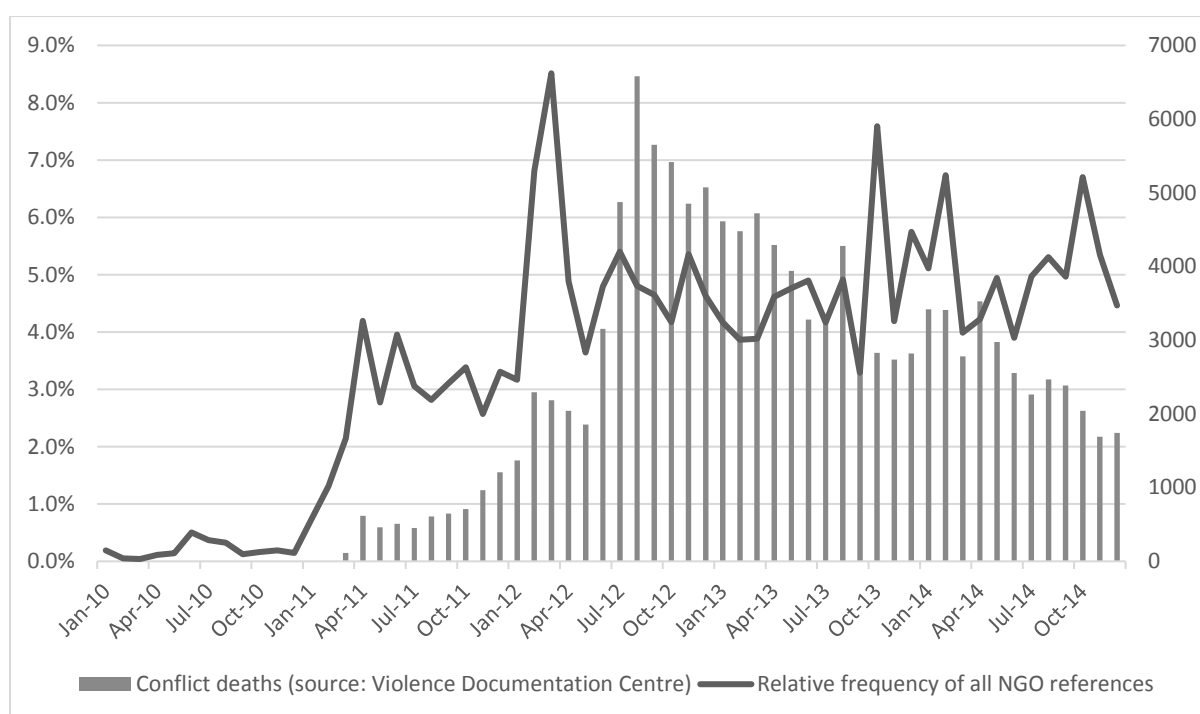


Still in 2010, NGO references were almost completely lacking in media coverage of political conflict in Syria, which at the time was limited to protests by individual dissidents. References became increasingly frequent when the first mass protests were violently oppressed by the regime. Within less than two years, the share of articles quoting NGOs had reached a level between 4 and 5 percent. We can therefore see a link between the emergence of violent conflict and human rights violations, and an increasing reliance on NGO sources. This is illustrated in Figure 3 in which we have added monthly casualty data collected by the Violence Documentation Center (VDC), a Syrian NGO. Although we are uncertain to what extent their figures are truly exhaustive<sup>6</sup>, we believe this to be a fairly reliable source as its figures roughly mirror the year-by-year casualty data published by the IISS Armed Conflict Database.<sup>7</sup> While monthly changes in violence are not necessarily mirrored by increased use of NGO sources, we found an overall correlation of 0,677 between those two types of data.

<sup>6</sup> For the VDC's methodology, see <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/about>.

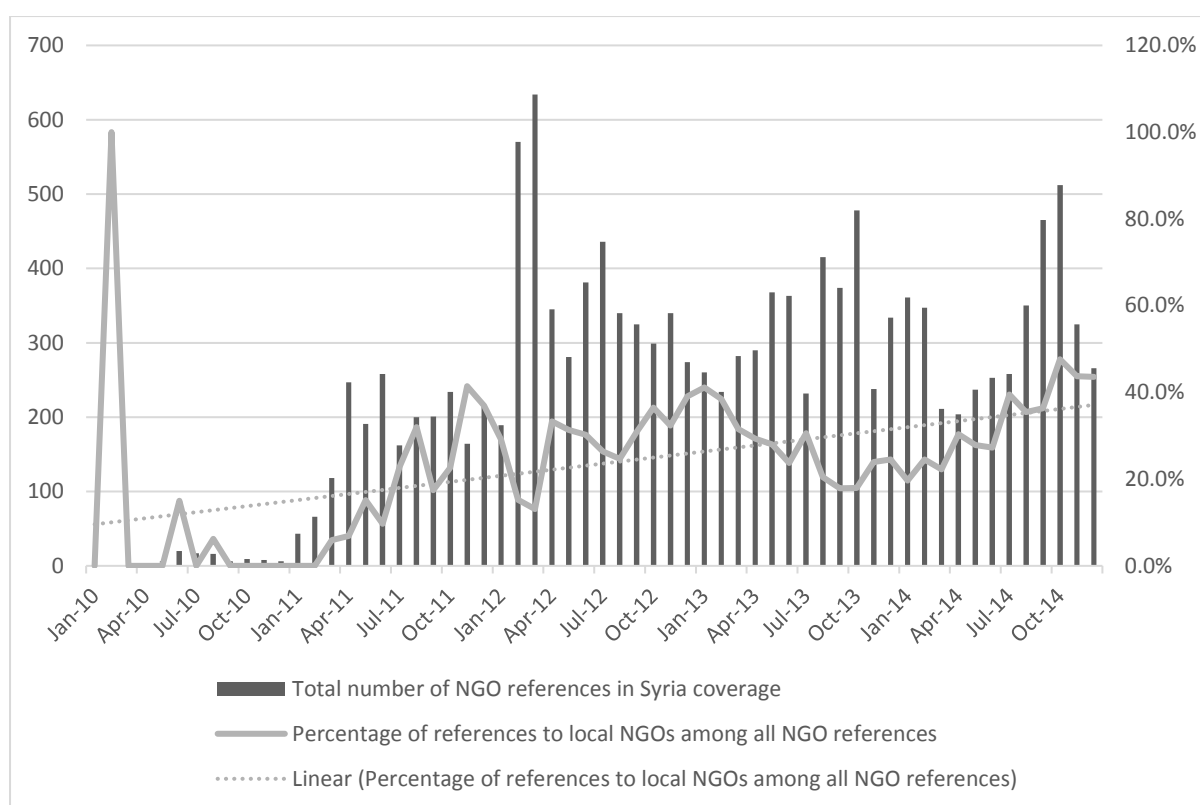
<sup>7</sup> <https://acd.iiss.org/conflicts/syrian-uprising-b2bb>. As communicated by personal email, the IISS data are based on a combination of data from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and killings covered by media reports.

Figure 3: conflict deaths and relative frequencies of NGO references, January 2010 to December 2014



What is even more interesting is the changing impact of “local” NGOs. We have found that the relative share of references to “local” NGOs increased rather steadily after the second half of 2011. This is surprising given that the scholarship on NGOs in media discourse has argued that only large, transnationally-operating NGOs with professional PR strategies and resources can have a significant impact on global media discourse (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Thrall et al., 2014). By the end of 2014, references to “local” NGOs represent 40 percent of all NGO references. Figure 4 illustrates this evolution in detail.

Figure 4: Share of references to local NGOs among all NGO references



Which are the NGOs that global news media cite most often? Among INGOs, the following table shows the top three. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as the national Red Cross / Red Crescent societies – although technically not the same organisation – are on top, perhaps due to their status of impartiality and focus on delivering humanitarian action in conflict zones. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are both professional, media-savvy NGOs that have made the manifold human rights violations in Syria centre of their advocacy campaigns.

Table 1: The three most frequently cited international NGOs

Name of NGO	Number of referenced articles
International Committee of the Red Cross / Red Cross / Red Crescent	4065
Human Rights Watch	2272
Amnesty International	1725

For “local” NGOs, the result is unequivocal. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) claims the top spot among all NGOs, including ICRC.

Table 2: The three most frequently cited local NGOs

Name of NGO	Number of referenced articles
Syrian Observatory for Human Rights	11857
Syrian Network for Human Rights	103
Syrian Organisation for Human Rights (Sawasiyah)	28

### 3.2. What kind of influence (I)? Protests and the question of sanctions against Assad

We analyse the influence of NGOs on media discourse on armed conflict in more detail by focusing on two key episodes. To make this manageable, we first sampled all articles (589) from the INFOCORE corpus containing the five most frequently cited NGOs during two crucial periods for the internationalisation of the conflict within three opinion-leading French and British news media (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Radio France Internationale, Financial Times, the Guardian, BBC World Service). We then selected 20 articles per NGO for each period (200 in total) to analyse how each NGO was predominantly cited. In this qualitative analysis we specifically looked for three types of claims: (i) evidential claims about important key facts related to important events, e.g. what has happened, when and to whom by who? (ii) Analytical or normative claims about the meaning of these events, the conflict and its main actors, e.g. what or who causes the conflict, who is to blame, and what are the most important consequences? (iii) prescriptive action-focused claims about what should be done by whom, e.g. who should act (or not act) in order to avoid harm, solve problems or create benefits. Whilst these different claims were relatively easily identifiable, a quantitative coding approach would have been of limited utility given comparability issues. Some articles present several claims, sometimes split over several sentences, while others briefly mention an NGO for an isolated claim about victim numbers.

The first period covers the beginnings of the initially peaceful protests for greater freedom and an end to corruption in Syrian provinces in March 2011 up to the point of August 2011 when the conflict had escalated due to the violent repression by the government and its associated paramilitary groups. Many opposition groups were now taking up arms and the “Free Syrian Army” was founded in late July. During this period, French, British and EU foreign policy turned from being rather cautious to becoming gradually more outspoken in their criticism of the Assad regime. Calls for wide-ranging reform were followed by condemnations of the repressive measures and human rights violations, backed up by tougher sanctions against the Syrian government and leading figures supporting it. After first calls for Assad to step down by France and the US in July, August marks an important milestone as the US, France, the UK and Germany jointly called on the regime to go.

In what way did the most visible NGOs influence French and British news coverage? The most frequently cited NGOs were SOHR and HRW. There were overall more British media samples referencing NGOs, and some NGOs, in particular the ICRC and AI, were less cited by the French than the British media outlets.

Table 3: Comparison of NGOs citations in French and British media, March to August 2011

	French media	British media	Total
SOHR	48	62	110
Human Rights Watch	35	66	101
Amnesty International	14	36	50
International Committee of the Red Cross	6	33	39
International Crisis Group	7	13	20
Total	110	210	320

Most quotations in the sample related to evidential claims about events significant to the evolving news coverage of the “Arab uprisings” spilling over to Syria. NGOs were mainly quoted as sources about the rapidly changing conflict, and in particular information about detentions, violent intimidation, torture and killings attributed almost exclusively to the Assad regime and predominantly Alawite paramilitary groups. One typical example was in *Le Monde* (2 April): ‘At Deera, the epicentre of the uprising against the regime since 18 March, there have been 30 people killed according to the authorities, 55 according to Amnesty International, more than 70 according to Human Right Watch and 130 according to the local militants’.<sup>8</sup> The BBC reported on another event on 19 April that ‘(a)ccording to Amnesty International, at least 200 people have been killed in clashes with security forces’. Moreover, NGOs were providing factual information about size and location of the protests and their “largely peaceful” nature. Important differences emerge here between NGOs with SOHR being almost exclusively cited for figures about numbers and names of detainees, the size of demonstrations, and, as the conflict escalated, the number of people injured and killed. Only exceptionally have we found for them assessments about government intentions, the development of the conflict or calls for action. Similarly, ICRC was cited predominantly for factual information, or indeed for what they do on the ground, rather than for its statements or reports. In contrast, AI and HRW provided not just updates on people killed, but also crucial evidence about severity and scale of human rights violations. For instance, AI’s annual 2011 report on 13 May was covered by the FT with respect to Syria, while a 54-page report by HRW documenting the repressive measures of the Assad regime published on 1 June (Human Rights Watch, 2011) was picked up as the main piece of news in the Guardian and *Le Monde* (3 June). The Guardian praised HRW for having ‘done an invaluable service in attempting to document such crimes’ and used it as a start for a lead commentary (2 June).

The most striking feature of NGO influence in the cases of HRW and partly also AI was the frequent co-occurrence of evidential claims with strong moral framing, and a little less frequently, calls for action. An example is an article in *Le Monde* (26 April), in which HRW’s interpretation of the conflict escalation was quoted as seeing the violence shift from repression to “massacres”. A more complex illustration is a BBC publication of 26 April that quotes HRW’s Beirut Director Nadim Houry with the analytical judgement that a ‘new phase’ has started as ‘[t]he government has clearly decided to go for a military centred response to the protests in an attempt to crush them and reinstate the wall of fear that protesters had started breaking down in some parts of Syria’. Both HRW and AI made their sympathy with the cause of the protesters and their disdain for the Assad regime visible. HRW’s Sarah Leah Whitson is quoted on the BBC (21 March) as saying

<sup>8</sup> All translations from French into English are own translations.

that 'Syrians have shown incredible courage in daring to protest publicly against one of the most repressive governments in the region, and they shouldn't have to pay with their lives'. The BBC quoted AI Secretary General Salil Shetty on 13 May as stating that the outcome of the uprising was 'on a knife-edge' as "there is a serious fightback from the forces of repression. The international community must seize the opportunity for change and ensure that 2011 is not a false dawn for human rights".

HRW was cited most frequently not just for findings, but also its recommendations on how the regime, but also other countries and organisations should act. In *Le Monde* (3 July), it calls on the UNSC to 'impose sanctions' and 'put pressure' to enforce accountability and, if the response is insufficient, 'refer Syria to the ICC'. The FT of 4 July quotes Richard Dicker of HRW as saying that sanctions may not worry 'a dictator', but may influence those around him. As the situation deteriorated and the UNSC was unable to act, a spokesperson of HRW accused the blocking states of having 'blood on their hands' (*Le Figaro* 2 August). HRW's explicit foreign policy advocacy is also visible in a published letter by HRW's EU Director on 19 August in the FT, where she clarifies earlier coverage that HRW had not called on the EU 'to end imports of Syrian oil', but rather advocated 'to freeze assets'. They had arrived at this position 'after careful consultation with a number of Syrian human rights activists inside and outside Syria'.

In contrast to the other four NGOs, ICG was mainly used to provide analytical enrichment to media coverage. Despite being an NGO working towards conflict prevention and peaceful conflict resolution, ICG was frequently introduced as a "think tank" that can shed light on the strategies of the conflict parties and the direction of the conflict, especially whether the Assad regime can survive. It was cited with the assessment that the regime's warnings against sectarianism risked becoming a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (19 July *Guardian*). In contrast to the norm-based framing and shaming of the other NGOs, ICG tried to persuade the regime to implement deep reforms to ensure its own survival. In the recommendation section of its reports, ICG tried to balance the need for international pressure with the risk that too much 'foreign interference' would consolidate support for the regime and steps advocated by ICC referral would leave it with 'no way out' except killing or subduing its opponents. These risks did not find much media resonance. A good example were the two reports ICG published on 6 July (on the opposition/protests) and 13 July (on the regime response). When the BBC (14 July) cited the 'always impressive ICG' it focused on the second report's conclusion that suggested an economic collapse may precipitate a regime collapse, ignoring scepticism expressed earlier in the report about energy sanctions, supplying rebels with weapons, endorsing the exile opposition or ICC referral.

In sum, human-rights focused NGOs were given significant prominence in media coverage not just as authoritative sources of what happened on the ground, but also as key voices advancing moral framing in favour of the protestors and supporters of an increasingly punitive foreign policy against the Assad regime. NGOs also supported analytical judgements about the low chances for the Assad regime to survive but, with the qualified exception of ICG, contributed little to understanding regime motivations or the potential downsides of sanctions and demands for regime change.

3.3. What kind of influence (II)? Chemical weapons use and the question of military punishment

The second episode covers the period from 19 March to 14 September 2013 and focuses on the emergence of credible reports on chemical weapons activities against the Syrian population. Four accusations of chemical weapons use were raised by both government and opposition troops between 19 March and late April. Even though the Assad regime had requested a UN investigation in March, it initially failed to agree to the scope of the enquiry and UN inspectors were only allowed into Syria on 18 August. Meanwhile, opposition groups, NGOs and foreign governments sought to gather evidence and expressed confidence that government troops were responsible for the use of chemical agents. On 21 August, large-scale chemical weapons attacks were reported in the Ghouta region which led to a flurry of global diplomatic activities and hastened discussions of crisis responses in national capitals. The international community ultimately supported a Russian proposal, to be implemented through the UNSC, under which Syria would place its chemical weapons under international control, consent to their destruction and join the Chemical Weapons Convention, and under which the US would not strike militarily.

Various policy options were discussed in France and the UK during this period of intense fighting (Revault d'Allonnes, 2015, pp. 61-72; Seldon & Snowden, 2015, pp. 325-345). Key questions were whether chemical agents had indeed been used and by whom, how this had influenced the course of the conflict, and whether military intervention should be launched. The preferred courses of action, as advocated by the two governments, were domestically controversial. The UK House of Commons vote on 29 August, which saw the defeat of the UK government motion and opposition amendment, sealed the fate of US and French policy preferences (Gaskarth, 2016; Kaarbo & Kenealy, 2016; Strong, 2015). French President François Hollande's case was severely weakened after US President Barack Obama announced on 31 August that he would seek parliamentary approval and Hollande eventually abandoned French plans for air strikes on 11 September (Revault d'Allonnes, 2015, p. 70).

This leads us to investigate the extent to which the most visible NGOs shaped media coverage of the Syria conflict in France and the UK during this time. When looking at the five most frequently cited NGOs, a first observation is that the UK media seemed to rely more heavily on information provided by NGOs than the French media. Yet we need to look at the nature of information provided by those NGOs to evaluate the influence this had on media discourse on armed conflict. Second, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights was again the most frequently cited NGO. Third, International Crisis Group was no longer among the top five sources of NGO claims.

*Table 4: Comparison of NGOs citations in French and British media, March to September 2013*

	French media	UK media	Total references
Syrian Observatory for Human Rights	45	96	141
International Committee of the Red Cross	14	26	40
Human Rights Watch	10	25	35
Médecins Sans Frontières	11	18	29
Oxfam	2	22	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>269</b>



SOHR was again mainly quoted for factual information such as casualty figures, identification of victims, numbers of missing and detained persons, troop movements, and developments in besieged or contested areas. Yet in contrast to the first episode, the provision of facts was in some cases accompanied by moral framing through which SOHR appraised events. This could not only be observed when SOHR reported regime activities (BBC 3 May; Guardian 4 May) but also when documenting atrocities by Islamist rebels. SOHR director Rami Abdul Rahman responded he could not 'ignore these crimes, which only serve the enemies of the revolution and the enemies of humanity' (BBC 10 June). Following the Ghouta attacks, SOHR was the first NGO to be quoted for casualty figures and details on the location (FT 22 August; le Monde 23 August). This was in only one instance linked to a call for action: 'SOHR has demanded on Wednesday that the UN experts ... launch an enquiry into the bombing which has been denied by Damascus' (Le Monde, 22 August).

ICRC, HRW and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) were referred to for further facts. A report in which HRW researchers documented 59 unlawful air attacks by regime forces and gave evidence of the use of cluster weapons was extensively covered by the BBC.<sup>9</sup> The findings were quoted to support the evidential claim that deliberate and indiscriminate attacks had been carried out by the Syrian Air Force since July 2012 which constituted a violation of international humanitarian law. This was accompanied by the call that 'measures by the UN, such as targeted sanctions, an arms embargo and the referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court, are urgently needed' (BBC 11 April). After the Ghouta attacks, MSF was quoted as a key factual authority by stating that doctors in three MSF-supported hospitals had treated 3600 patients, most of whom had arrived in the space of less than three hours, with neurotoxic symptoms and that 355 had died (BBC 24 August). This was the single most cited information across all sampled articles. MSF's statement that the symptoms as well as the huge influx of patients suggested mass exposure to a neurotoxic agent strengthened the evidential claim that an unprecedented chemical weapons attack had happened (BBC 27 August). Yet the initial MSF report, which was also quoted by Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron during the Commons vote, was soon contested when it was assumed that casualty figures were much higher. Le Figaro goes as far as saying that Cameron relied on wrong evidence which might have compromised the vote – arguing that US Secretary of State John Kerry was instead referring to 1429 victims the next day (5 September).

ICRC, HRW, MSF and Oxfam were widely referred to for analytical commentary, often using factual information to support evidential claims and calls for action. Out of 20 selected media articles per NGO, 10 contained calls for action by ICRC, 10 by Oxfam, 7 by HRW, 3 by MSF and 1 by SOHR. Only few examples can be discussed here. On 15 June, Oxfam CEO Mark Goldring appealed to G8 leaders to find a solution to the Syria crisis and make the Geneva peace conference a reality (Guardian 15 June). ICRC launched a new appeal for access to besieged areas following the Ghouta attacks (BBC 9 September). On 22 August, HRW called for an establishment of the facts under close involvement of the UN and ICC, arguing that the international community had tolerated the killings of civilians for too long (BBC). On 30 August, former MSF president Rony Brauman advocated the idea of a limited military intervention, arguing the use of chemical weapons 'represented a qualitative change in the conduct of this war' and that 'a symbolic threshold had been crossed' (le Monde 30 August). Interestingly, MSF had issued a press release two days earlier saying its statements should not be used to justify military action (Médecins sans frontières, 2013). MSF also reiterated it could not scientifically confirm the use of chemical weapons nor establish who was responsible (BBC 24 August). Based on a report published on 10 September, HRW was quoted as saying that evidence strongly suggested

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<sup>9</sup> See also: Human Rights Watch (2013), *Death from the Skies*, 10 April.

government forces were behind the 21 August attacks and that Sarin was used (BBC 10 September; Guardian 10 September). HRW researchers were quoted arguing that the attacks 'should refocus the international debate on deterring the use of such weapons and more broadly protecting Syria's civilian population' (Guardian 10 September).

While the five NGOs were influential in gathering facts, providing expert commentary, shaping evidential beliefs and frames and prescribing courses of action, their influence differed significantly across these themes. The four INGOs were more trusted, at least by the UK media, than SOHR, and their information was generally perceived as impartial and authoritative. The coverage of HRW was more extensive than of the other NGOs, with more space provided in the sampled media articles. Four HRW research reports were referred to in detail and contributed to the emergence of various evidential beliefs (BBC 17 May, 10 September, 13 September; Guardian 25 July, 10 September; le Monde 11 September). This is noteworthy, given HRW's limited physical access to Syria (Le Monde 25 August). Yet the organisation was able to gain credibility for its analysis by drawing on a broad network of contacts, carrying out interviews via Skype and using Open-Source Intelligence to triangulate its findings (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

#### 4. Conclusion: NGO influence on conflict news of Syria

The article illustrates the utility of the supply and demand model and confirms expectations of growing NGO influence in this "best case" scenario. It provides a more nuanced picture of *when* NGOs can be expected to have *what kind of influence* on media discourses and highlights the influential role of new types of local NGOs relying on networks of citizen activists. It shows that NGOs contribute significantly to shaping media accounts of evolving conflict dynamics, key events and actor culpability for socially deviant behaviour such as the killing of civilians or the use of chemical weapons. The results indicate that NGOs are increasingly filling a supply gap left by government sources that have lost in credibility and a demand gap created by the difficulties of media organisations to provide direct reporting and verification from highly volatile and dangerous conflict settings. Our findings can complement existing accounts of media coverage of foreign affairs that tend to give primacy to governmental sources, but they do show the benefits of combining organizational, relational and case-specific variables in an account of which sources have what kind of influence. Our findings provide a more nuanced assessment of when NGOs are more or less influential in media discourses of conflict, even though we could not test a number of further intervening factors which might influence the concrete impact of NGOs in specific national settings. Examples are (i) different cultures of journalism as French media reports are less fact-oriented than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, and therefore potentially less prone to relying on NGOs as sources of factual evidence (Chalaby, 2004); (ii) state-society relations as NGOs are traditionally regarded as more "impartial" actors in the UK than in France (Cumming, 2009; Stroup, 2012), and, (iii) NGO activity profiles as "doing" humanitarian NGOs with a strong presence on the ground such as MSF and ICRC are less active communicators than "talking" advocacy NGOs like Human Rights Watch, and "thinking" NGOs such as International Crisis Group (the authors, 2014, p. 6).

We do not assert that rising NGO influence on media coverage is necessarily positive. In fact, a good argument can be made that news media's increasing dependence on NGOs for conflict coverage is problematic: 'While providing information on forgotten conflicts and access to forbidden areas, [NGO] also attract penniless journalists whom they expect will provide coverage that will at the very least be uncritical, and ideally be

favorable' (Marthoz, 2007, p. 229). What is problematic is that some NGOs, particularly those focused on Human Rights, are quoted with conflict interpretations and advocacy, which are strictly speaking outside of their mandate as well as their expertise. However, many NGOs do provide staff with working conditions that are more favourable to quality research and fact-checking than what is possible in the majority of newsrooms today. In this sense, the growing reliance on NGOs could be seen as a symptom rather than cause of the multiple crises affecting Western journalism today.

Further research will be necessary to evaluate the extent to which claims produced by NGOs did actually change foreign policy agendas. Our current findings offer little hard evidence that NGO influence on media coverage has had a direct impact on foreign policy action by either the French or British government. But we do know that the Syrian conflict has been intensively debated in both political systems using a number of claims emphasized by NGOs, and that in the course of this debate a number of foreign policy actions, including EU diplomatic statements, sanctions and peace initiatives, were adopted. These measures were largely seen as ineffective to prevent or stop the conflict, in particular in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government in 2013. Yet, the fact that these measures were adopted at a time when the EU and the US tried to keep a low profile may well speak in favour of an agenda-setting effect of NGO communication that merits further research.

## Author biographies

Christoph Meyer is Professor of European & International Politics at King's College London. He was Co-PI on the EU-funded project on media and violent conflict ([www.infocore.eu](http://www.infocore.eu)). He has been working on foreign, security and defence policy, including early warning for conflict prevention, public communication and media coverage as well as economic governance. He is currently working on two books related to Heeding Warnings about War: Persuasion in Foreign Affairs (with De Franco, Brante and Otto) and The Changing Influence of NGOs in Mediated Conflict Communication (with E Sangar).

Eric Sangar is a FNRS research fellow based at the University of Namur (Belgium). He is also an associated researcher at the Centre Emile Durkheim of Sciences Po Bordeaux. Between 2014 and 2015, he worked as part of the European research project Infocore as a Research Associate at King's College London, where he analysed, with Christoph Meyer and Eva Michaels, the influence of NGOs on media discourses of armed conflict. Previously, he served as a Fernand Braudel Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire (IRSEM) in Paris, and as a Research Associate at the Department of International Relations of the University of Stuttgart. In his personal research, he is studying the links between collective memory and uses of history in foreign policy and conflict discourse, the role of emotions in the justification of violence, and diffusion processes in Franco–German relations. Eric Sangar has published several articles in various journals such as Political Psychology, the Journal of Strategic Studies, and Contemporary Security Policy, as well as the monograph 'Historical experience: Burden or bonus in today's wars? The British Army and the German Bundeswehr in Afghanistan', and as an editor, the collective volume Researching Emotions in International Relations: Methodological Perspectives on the Emotional Turn. He holds a PhD from the European University Institute in Florence.  
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## 5. Methodological appendix

### List of media outlets sampled in the INFOCORE corpus on the Syrian conflict:

- *Qatar Al Jazeera*
- *UK Daily Mail*
- *UK Daily Telegraph*
- *UK The Guardian*
- *UK BBC*
- *UK Financial Times*
- *UK The Economist*
- *France Le Figaro*
- *France L'Express*
- *France Le Monde*
- *France RFI*
- *France AFP*
- *Germany Der Spiegel*
- *Germany Die Welt*
- *Germany Süddeutsche Zeitung*
- *Germany Deutsche Welle*
- *EU Euronews*
- *USA CNN*
- *USA New York Times*
- *USA AP*
- *China Xinhua*
- *Qatar Al Jazeera*
- *Syria Tishreen*
- *Syria DP News*
- *Syria Souriatna*
- *Syria Enab Baladi*
- *Syria Baladna*
- *Syria SANA*
- *Hibr*
- *Halab News*
- *Syria Souriatna*
- *Enab Baladi*

### List of terms used to identify NGO references in the automated content analysis:

- Security & Defence Agenda
- Center for European Policy Studies
- European Policy Center (EPC)
- Royal Egmont Institute
- War on Want
- Muslim Council of Britain

- Democratic Progress Institute
- Association au Service de l'Action Humanitaire (ASAH)
- CARE International
- Caritas Internationalis/Caritas national associations/Secours Catholique
- CIVIL NGO for Human Rights and Development of Civil Society
- Deutsche Welthungerhilfe
- Freres des Hommes
- ICRC/IFRC/Red Cross/Red Crescent/Magen David Adom
- Médecins sans frontières/Doctors without Borders
- Oxfam
- Solidarites
- Terre des Hommes fédération internationale
- War Child
- Agir contre la guerre
- BDS
- International Solidarity Movement
- Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples
- Palestine Solidarity Campaign
- Amnesty International
- FIDH (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme/International Federation of Human Rights)
- Global Witness
- Human Rights Watch
- Reporters sans frontières
- Conciliation Resources
- International Alert
- Safer world
- International Crisis Group
- Coordination SUD
- Developpement et Paix
- Triangle Generation Humanitaire
- Fondation Hirondelle
- Free Press Unlimited/Radio Netherlands Training Centre RNTC
- Institut Panos/IPP
- Internews
- Syfia International/Syfia Grands Lacs
- Bond for international development
- Concordis International
- EIRENE
- La Benevolencija
- Search for Common Ground SFCG
- Physicians for Human Rights
- Institute for the study of war
- Syria Trust for Development
- Syrian Charter Organization
- Relief and Reconciliation for Syria

- Union of Syrian Medical Relief
- Human Rights Association in Syria (HRAS)
- The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
- Violations Documentation Centre
- Association for the Defense of the Rights of the Victims of the Syrian Revolution
- Syrian Commission for Justice and Accountability
- Syrian Network for Human Rights
- Syrian Organisation for Human Rights (Sawasiyah)

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